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September 23, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT  
FROM: HENRY A. KISSINGER  
SUBJECT: Meeting with Vice President Ky

Attached at Tab A is General Haig's report of his meeting with Vice President Ky today which lasted an hour and a half. Ky was friendly and made every effort to convey an image of reasonableness and responsibility. In the course of their conversation, he made the following interesting comments:

-- He agreed about the need for stability and professed understanding of your position but stated that the U.S. should not be afraid to change its policy. In his view the problem is not that we have leverage but that we are supporting the wrong policies and the wrong man.

-- Recalling that in 1967 he had voluntarily withdrawn from the Presidential race without pressure from any quarter, he said that he was again prepared to make personal sacrifices if the situation called for them.

-- Ky feels that with President Thieu in power, the South Vietnamese cannot survive the long term political struggle with the Communists which will intensify after the U.S. withdraws.

-- In answer to a question as to whether he or General Minh plan to campaign in the referendum, Ky stated that the referendum was meaningless. He said he was ready for arrangements with Thieu but that Thieu's answer was that it is too late. Ky indicated he thought there was still time if Thieu were prepared to sit down with others and solve the problem in a reasonable and patriotic way.

-- Ky said that if Thieu were to acknowledge existence of a political crisis, then he and others would be prepared to help solve the problem.

-- In concluding, Ky stated that we shouldn't be afraid that he would act without the fullest consideration of all the factors involved. By way of indicating his feeling that the political spotlight focused on him, he noted that Big Minh had told him things were now up to Ky.

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**FROM: Brigadier General Haig - Saigon**

1. I met with Vice President Ky for one and one-half hours today at his office in the Presidential palace. The conversation was friendly and Ky made every effort to convey an image of reasonableness and responsibility.
2. I opened our discussion with a presentation of our view of the present situation. At this critical stage South Vietnam needs political unity and strength above all to capitalize on the impressive gains it has already made. Nationalist forces must work out their differences in a legal and constitutional context. Resort to extra-legal means or urgings in that direction can only undermine the nationalist cause and encourage the common enemy which at this time is facing many difficulties.
3. I stressed to Ky that from the U. S. point of view continued stability here was a vital factor affecting our ability to assure continued U. S. support to South Vietnam. Clearly instability and disorder in Vietnam would jeopardize our efforts to guarantee that U.S. withdrawals are conducted in as orderly a way as possible and that Vietnam gets the other kinds of help that it will need for a long time to come.
4. So despite the disappointments of this summer, I said, we must keep our eye on the main objective which is the ability of South Vietnam to defend itself and that in no small part depends on the U.S. public support for our efforts here.
5. Ky said he agreed with me about the need for stability. He then repeated many of the arguments that are already familiar to you. He said he had not understood the electoral process. It was more complicated than just a three-way race between himself, Thieu and Minh. Minh had withdrawn because he knew that in a two-way race he couldn't win. He (Ky) had pulled out because Thieu had made things 'impossible' for him. Everyone knew that with Ky's tied to the military and government apparatus his candidacy would have offered some hope of neutralizing the advantages of Thieu's incumbency. Ky's presence in the race would have given some province and district chiefs the courage to disregard orders to rig the election.
6. Thus the Vietnamese people now face a dilemma. Do they resist Thieu, running the risk of disorders and the attendant prospect of cuts in

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U.S. aid? Or, do they resign themselves to Thieu in the short-term but face the certainty of instability and an inevitable "explosion" in the longer run? This dilemma weighs heavier on the Vietnam people than it did in 1963 and they are considering what steps to take "more carefully" than they did then because the communists are stronger today.

7. But, Ky said, we also shouldn't underestimate the strength of nationalist opposition to Thieu. He is opposed by an array of Catholics, Buddhists, students and much of the 1.1 million man army. "No one even knows whether the tanks which now surround the palace are really loyal to Thieu," and there is no telling what the so-called "baby Turks," disgruntled majors and colonels in the armed forces, might someday decide to do.

8. Ky said that, therefore, the problem must be solved definitely and without delay. He fully understood President Nixon's position, his concerns about disorder and about the uncertainties which would arise from a period of political transition by the creation of a political vacuum. But the United States shouldn't be afraid of change. Ky said he was not speaking about a new leader but about a new policy. (Comment: Later Ky said both the man<sup>and</sup> the policy had to change but this first remark, said quite deliberately, made me wonder whether Ky wasn't leaving himself an opening.)

9. I told Ky it wasn't a matter of personalities. The Vietnamese must sort out their own political problems and we were not committed to any particular individual. However, what was important to our mutual cause was that the regime be able to move with unity and strength.

10. Ky rejoined that despite U.S. professions of non-interference, examples of our political involvement here were abundant. There had been Ambassador Bunker's activities during the past weeks. There was President Nixon's statement. These proved that the U.S. still has leverage here. The Vietnamese know and accept this because they are realistic people. The problem is not that we have leverage but that we are supporting the wrong policies and the wrong man.

11. Ky said he was fully aware of his responsibilities in the present situation. He would never act in a way merely designed to promote his selfish personal interests. He recalled that in 1967 he had voluntarily withdrawn from the Presidential race without pressure from any quarter. If the situation again called for personal sacrifice on his part, he was prepared to make it.

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12. Ky said that if Thieu remains in power and continues his present policies, it will be very difficult for South Vietnam to survive - not in the next five to six months but over a period of several years. When the U. S. has withdrawn, then the political struggle with the communists will begin. Ky said that with Thieu in power he saw no hope for success in such a struggle.

13. This, Ky repeated, was the dilemma: The short-term requirement for U. S. support against the need to look to the political future. To solve this dilemma Ky had proposed a solution within the framework of the constitution, a proposal which would have provided for an honest and fair election; but Thieu had rejected it because President Nixon's statement had given Thieu more strength.

14. I repeated that the President had not intended his statements as support for any individual. Ky said he understood fully but the Vietnamese people had nonetheless interpreted it that way. I repeated that what concerned us was the prospect of disorder in the streets and loose talk about resorting to extra-constitutional means. Our own President accepts the concept of political struggle; he has extensive personal experience in this regard; and he has himself lived through many disappointments. But what the U. S. cannot accept are solutions which are not in accord with the constitutional process.

15. I asked Ky if either he or General Minh planned to campaign against Thieu in the referendum. Ky answered that the referendum was meaningless and did not offer South Vietnamese people true opportunity to express their will. Ky added that he was not against dictatorship if it is a temporary necessity but then the people must be told this clearly rather than fed talk about democracy.

16. Ky then said 'I am ready for an arrangement with Thieu but Thieu's answer is that it is too late.' Ky said he thought there was still time if Thieu was prepared to sit down with others and solve the problem in a reasonable and patriotic way. He said he had met the other day with Senator Tran Van Don and other politicians. They had urged reconciliation and Ky had replied that was fine with him but what about Thieu. Ky said, 'If Thieu calls tomorrow, I am ready.'

17. Ky said he saw no hope if Thieu stays isolated as he is now. He refuses to recognize the existence of a political crisis. Ky said if Thieu were to acknowledge its existence, then he (Ky) and others would be prepared to help solve the problem.

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

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- 4 -

18. As the conversation ended, I told Ky that democracy had taken a long time to develop in the U.S. There had been some progress here but there was still a long way to go. Right now the stakes are high and we must keep our eye on the main threat. I said I could conceive a situation in which disorders would reach a point where we couldn't assure U.S. support.

19. I said I understood Ky's position, but I had to emphasize how important it was that we hold the situation together now that success is within our grasp. I told Ky he would have to be patient in working towards his own political goals.

20. Ky replied that he would never do anything which betrayed the sacrifices of the South Vietnamese and United States people. He asked that I stress to you particularly his concerns about the future and the political struggle with the communists. Ky said he knew the people of North Vietnam were not hard-core communists and with a strong free bastion in the South that someday the North could be liberated. But in the short term South Vietnam must ready itself for the political struggle in its own back yard.

21. Ky said he believed he was in the most delicate political position in GVN and everyone has their eye trained on him. He knew that whatever course he chose it would affect the future of the country. He said we shouldn't be afraid that he would act without the fullest consideration of all the factors involved. Even Big Minh had told him that things were now up to Ky.

22. I closed the conversation by saying I was confident Ky would act in the best interests of his country.

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